

Social Inequality in Political Participation: How Individualization Reduces the Chances for Political Representation of Lower Classes

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How do citizens change—or maintain—the nature of their political participation? This is the central question of this symposium. It overlooks that some citizens do not participate at all—even in the least demanding, least difficult and politically very consequential form of participation: voting. It allows any citizen—even those with very little political interest, knowledge and time—to express his or her political preferences. While some modes of participation are socially very selective, in principle voting does not discriminate against citizens with low social status and little educational attainment. Compared to other modes of political participation such as membership in social movements, boycotting certain products, demonstrations, squatting houses, or exchanging arguments in settings of deliberative democracy, voting requires much less in terms of time, knowledge, information, and other resources or motivation.

However, social inequality in electoral participation is growing. In the 1970s, many Western European democracies did not display any signs of social inequality in voting. Today, there is an electoral gap between the lower and higher strata everywhere. We calculated the difference in electoral participation between those fifty percent of the population with the lowest and those with the highest educational attainment using ninety-four electoral surveys in eight Western European countries between 1956 and 2009¹. During these fifty years the gap widened from almost zero to five percent. Why

do the lower classes start to withdraw silently from politics?

They do so, because voting becomes increasingly difficult for them since heuristics for decision-making are less and less available. Textbooks from secondary school tell us that citizens consider the programs of political parties, compare them to their own preferences, and then decide to vote for the party which is closest to their own inclinations. This applies, of course, only to some citizens. Many, if not most of us, use heuristics, such as 'What did I vote last time?,' 'Are there any recommendations from a trustworthy partner, parent, colleague, or friend from whom I know that he or she shares similar views with me?,' 'Finally, are there any organizations to which I have a strong feeling of belonging, which evaluate my electoral choices on behalf of me, and make reasonable suggestions what to vote for?' Probably the most important European organizations that have produced such strong electoral recommendations are trade unions and the Catholic Church. Although some trade unions claimed to be politically neutral, almost all of them have been able to signal to their membership which parties further workers' interests. Similarly, on election days, Catholic priests have frequently offered crystal clear hints to their congregations on what and what not to vote for at the ballot boxes.

These cues have helped those citizens who lacked the analytical competence, time, interest, and knowledge to evaluate individually their electoral options. Lower social strata are

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particularly dependent on the availability of these cues; while members of higher strata avail themselves of more means allowing them to arrive at a voting decision on their own with a limited investment of time and energy. Individualization denotes the loosening of attachment to organizations and socio-cultural groups. By reducing social integration, it frees us from efficient social control and offers us the opportunity to decide what we want and prefer. By implication cues from these various forms of social integration are no longer available. This hits lower classes particularly and endangers their political representation. Without cues, voting becomes a very difficult task for them. Under these conditions, for many citizens the rational solution is non-participation.

In our research, we considered various forms of social integration which might produce cues for voting decisions: from living with a partner over membership in a trade union or attending church at least once a month to meeting with friends, relatives, or work colleagues more than once a month or to feeling close to a political party. Whether we used a composite index of social integration or entered our indicators separately in a regression model, the substantive results of our analyses of five cumulative waves (2002-2010) of the European Social Surveys for fifteen Western European countries remained the

same. Social integration reduces the likelihood of non-participation for citizens with low social status much more than for those with high social status. For an individual at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, a one unit increase in the composite indicator of social integration (which varies between 0 and 1) implies an increase in the probability to vote by more than thirty percent if she/he is fully integrated in a socio-political group. By contrast, the probability to vote for an individual at the top of the hierarchy increases only by about ten percent if reaching the maximum values of social integration. The political participation of the less educated depends particularly on membership in social networks; and once these network affiliations decline, the lower classes tend to withdraw from politics. Cynically, individualization, a process that reduces social control and allows for more individual options of life styles and behavior, reduces at the same time as the chances for political representation of the group-specific preferences of lower classes.

Endnote

1. Klaus Armingeon and Lisa Schädel (2015) Social Inequality in Political Participation: The Dark Sides of Individualisation, *West European Politics*, 38:1, 1-27, DOI: 10.1080/01402382.2014.929341

The Emergence of New Protest Mobilization Strategies

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Recent years have seen the emergence of national protest movements that have rapidly achieved mass mobilization. These movements have come from both the right, with the rise of

the Tea Party in 2009, and from the left with the emergence of the Occupy movement in 2011 and, very recently, the protests against police killings that began after the shooting of Michael